

Rock Climbing – A Natural High

Rock climbing has enjoyed quite a boom in the last decade and it's no surprise when one considers the myriad of benefits you can derive from the sport. Rock climbing offers a level of conditioning unmatched in any other activity. Few sports simultaneously improve your strength, endurance, and mental concentration all within the same activity. After all rock climbing is as much a mental strategy as it is a physical one. A very challenging route is often approached with the same mental discipline as a chess game as you continually negotiate your moves in strategic and efficient ways. That said, we will delve into various ways to condition your body for this challenging and rewarding sport.

When it comes to training your body for the sport of rock climbing one would usually assume the most important thing we can do is pull-ups. Though this is important we will begin with training an underestimated part of the body, the legs. Very often we see photographs of climbers with well-defined arms and backs and will often underestimate the power of the legs. Essentially climbing a rock involves the same principles as climbing a ladder. Your legs are what ultimately advance you through your climbs. The only difference is when scaling a rock; your legs require a much more explosive lift than that of a ladder. You will often find yourself in a one leg squatting position, having to use that leg to full extension to lift you high enough for your hands to grab the next hold above you. Therefore the following exercises are extremely beneficial for developing this kind of strength and endurance.

Lower Body

Weighted Step Ups:

Step-ups are a very easy exercise requiring you to simply place your front foot on a step in front of you. (The higher the step the better) From that position simply step up to full extension of the knee. Lower yourself down slowly with the same leg. Keep your body as straight as possible resisting the temptation to lean forward too much.

Next you want to add weight to the exercise. You can simply place two dumbbells of a comfortable yet challenging weight in your hands and step up repeatedly while alternating legs. Remember, that coming down slowly will nurture the kind of control your looking for when climbing. You can also perform this exercise with a weighted bar on your shoulders abiding of course by the same principals.

Lastly, without the weights, perform the step-ups in a quick and dynamic motion. You may want to perform anywhere from 50 to 100 of these. This will increase your leg's tolerance for the quick and explosive movements required on the rock. Remember when climbing, your explosive movement comes from sometimes very awkward positions, often after the leg has been still for some time. That's why we want to teach the leg to endure both slow and steady as well as quick and dynamic movements. Alternating these two types of step-ups

will train your legs
for control, explosiveness, and coordination.

Upper Body

We have already established how much work the legs actually perform in the sport of rock climbing. More often than not our upper bodies simply serve as a guide for us to stabilize ourselves on the often-unforgiving surface of the rock. That said we still need a well-conditioned upper body to assist us in our adventurous ascents.

Pull-ups

Yes, the infamous pull-ups. The most simple and direct way to train your upper body is to do the wide grip pull up. If you do not have the strength to pull your body weight, then begin with lat pull downs on a machine. Please keep in mind, although lifting your body weight is a benefit to rock climbing, it is not a requirement. I have witnessed many a competent climber who was not capable of performing body weight pull-ups.

Also keep in mind while practicing upper body pull-ups, that you want to keep your head in front of the bar and not behind the neck. Even the most extreme climbing circumstance would never demand of a climber to place his head in a behind the neck motion while climbing. This is not a function required of us in a day-to-day situation nor in an extreme circumstance such as climbing. Therefore practicing pull-ups behind the neck is functionally useless and has been shown to create unnecessary stress on the shoulder joint.

What will really benefit you, as a rock climber is to eventually perform these pull-ups or lat pull downs with as little finger surface as possible. In other words instead of wrapping your entire hand around the bar, little by little work your hands closer to the fingertips. Eventually you will develop the tolerance for performing pull-ups with just the tips of your fingers. Any of you who studied martial arts may recall how uncomfortable it was to perform pushups on your fingertips. This will feel just as awkward at first but will increase your body's tolerance for the demands required on the rocks.

Keep a lookout for more rock-climbing training tips in future articles.